

PRO-ISIS GROUPS IN MINDANAO AND THEIR LINKS TO INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

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I. INTRODUCTION

ISIS has deepened cooperation among extremist groups in Southeast Asia, but most law enforcement agencies retain a strongly national orientation, without in-house expertise on groups outside their own borders. At a time when an accurate assessment of the security threat in Indonesia or Malaysia may depend in part on understanding developments in the Philippines, this gap needs to be filled. It is especially urgent because in the short term, ISIS losses in the Middle East could increase the incentive to undertake acts of violence at home.

The Philippines is important because as far as the ISIS leadership is concerned, it is the extension of the caliphate in the region. While it has not been formally declared as a province or *wilayat*, ISIS has endorsed an Abu Sayyaf leader, Isnilon Hapilon, as amir for Southeast Asia, and Southeast Asians in Syria have pledged their loyalty to him.

Support for ISIS in Mindanao has meant more than a repackaging of old kidnapping-for-ransom groups. It has facilitated cooperation across clan and ethnic lines, widened the extremist recruitment pool to include computer-savvy university students and opened new international communication and possibly funding channels. It means that more deadly violence in the Philippines involving alliances of pro-ISIS groups is a matter of when, not if. It may also increase the possibility of cross-border extremist operations.

This report looks at four pro-ISIS groups in Mindanao and their regional ties:

- The Basilan-based faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) led by Isnilon Hapilon. A small number of foreign fighters, mostly from Malaysia, have joined him.
- Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP) led by Mohammad Jaafar Maguid alias Tokboy out of Sarangani and Sultan Kudarat provinces. Tokboy had an Indonesian helping with strategy, fighting and funding until late 2015, and ties to Indonesia and Syria are almost certainly ongoing.
- The Maute Group, also known as IS-Ranao, based in Lanao del Sur. One of the leaders, Omarkhayam Romato Maute, is married to an Indonesian whom he met when both were students at al-Azhar in Egypt.
- Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), based in the Liguasan Marsh, Maguindanao. BIFF emerged in 2010 as a splinter group of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and has had close ties to Southeast Asian fugitives.

One question is how the threat from pro-ISIS groups will be affected by President Duterte's various peace initiatives. In the past, the assumption has always been that failure to produce concrete deliverables on the peace front would discredit the moderate Moro leadership and lead to support for more militant splinters.

Now, thanks to ISIS, the danger is more from unification than splintering, as Philippine groups join forces for operations. The bombing of the night market in Davao on 2 September 2016 is a case in point.

This ISIS-driven unity may well be only temporary, but it could leave behind a hard core of Mindanao-based jihadists who are more ideological than their predecessors and look to like-minded associates in the region for support.

A workable peace with the MILF remains an important barrier to the spread of extremism, but there is likely to be a less obvious correlation than in the past between the dynamics of negotiation and the risk of violence. For one thing, the Duterte government has put multiple options on the table in terms of proposals, parties and sequencing so that there is less likely to be a single trigger that could push dissidents toward armed violence, as happened, for example,

after the sudden collapse of MILF-government talks in 2008. Second, if ideology is playing a more prominent role, then the motivation for attacks could also change.

This report is based on interviews in October 2016 in Manila, Davao, Zamboanga and Cotabato as well with Indonesians who once fought in the Philippines, and on a review of trial documents and other primary source material.

II. THE ASG, ISNILON HAPILON AND “IS-BASILAN”

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in Basilan is of particular importance because of Isnlon Hapilon’s new role as amir. ASG, however, is one of the most difficult of the Philippine groups to parse because of its many factions.

An Indonesian writing on the mobile phone messaging application Telegram in mid-2016 basically divided the ASG into two: all the ASG loyal to ISIS were now in Basilan; if they were still on Jolo, they were not ISIS. This appears to be crudely accurate, though Hapilon himself is said to travel back and forth, and boundaries among factions are fluid. There are also individuals, such as Malaysian national Amin Baco, who serve as a bridge between the two groups.

For the most part, however, the ASG groups involved in the high-profile kidnappings for ransom in 2016 belong or feed into Jolo-based subcommands that do not see themselves as part of ISIS. They have a loose allegiance to Radullon Sahiron, a native of Patikul, Sulu, rather than Isnlon. Their use of ISIS flags may be a way of upping the ransom demands or simply attracting attention; their resort to beheadings is punishment for failure to pay by the appointed deadline, not for any religious or ideological transgression.

The Basilan ASG also used to survive by kidnapping and extortion, particularly in the years 2007 to 2014.¹ More recently – throughout 2016 for example – it has avoided abductions, raising questions of how it is being financed. Its members are mostly ethnic Yakan, distinct from the Tausug of Sulu, and are bound together by ethnicity; family ties; loyalty to the leadership; and a strong desire for revenge, given the number of their relatives killed by police and military. Many children of “martyrs”, referred to as *ajang-ajang* (children) or *anak iluh* (orphans), are reported to be among the most militant.

Both Basilan and Sulu are now the targets of massive military operations with troops freed up for action against the ASG by Duterte’s ceasefire with the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People’s Army. (It is worth recalling that it was then-President Estrada’s “all-out war” against the MILF in 2000 that became the trigger for a bomb attack in Jakarta that nearly killed the Philippine ambassador.)

It remains unclear why ISIS selected Isnlon Hapilon as “the mujahid authorised to lead the soldiers of the Islamic State in the Philippines” and as amir for Southeast Asia.² He reportedly speaks neither Arabic nor English, and his religious knowledge is limited. His appointment may reflect his long ties to foreign jihadis; communication with Southeast Asians affiliated to ISIS in Syria; his perceived control of territory; or his own eagerness for the role.

A. *The ASG’s Resilience*

The ASG has been under more or less constant attack from Philippine security forces since 2002. It has survived through the strength of clan ties, the support of local politicians and its willingness of different factions to build tactical alliances to expand their reach. This last

1 Memorandum from Criminal Investigation and Detection Group, Philippine National Police, “Debriefing of ASG Top Ranking Leader KHAIR MUNDOS y MALBAN,” 17 June 2014, pp.3-4.

2 This phrase was used in the video “The Solid Structure”, released on 21 June 2016 by ISIS’s Furqan Media.

characteristic is what makes the fighters on Basilan more deadly than their numbers or skills would suggest.

A brief recap of those alliances is in order. The ASG was founded in 1991 by Abdurajak Janjalani, a native of Basilan and a Middle East-trained scholar who had once been a member of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). He initially called his organisation simply “Islamic Movement” (al-Harakat al-Islamiyah), a name the Basilan faction restored for itself in 2016. In the mid-1990s the fledgling group, dwarfed in numbers by MNLF and its larger splinter, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), developed a loose alliance with al-Qaeda.³

Abdurajak Janjalani died in 1998 in a clash with Philippine police. His younger brother, Khadaffy, took over, and in 2000 and 2001, led two kidnappings from resorts in Sipadan, Malaysia and Palawan, Philippines that attracted worldwide notoriety. Isnlon Hapilon was also involved.⁴

In 2002, in the name of fighting terrorism, the U.S. Special Forces sent first advisers, then troops, to support the government against the ASG. The U.S. operations forced the ASG leadership out of Basilan to Jolo, Zamboanga and Central Mindanao. They also gave ASG a strong motivation for strengthening its relations with foreign jihadis, particularly members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) from Indonesia and its affiliate in Malaysia, Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM). It also built ties to a group of militant Muslim converts known as the Rajah Solaiman Movement, operating out of Luzon. That alliance among other things produced the deadly Superferry bombing of February 2004 that took 116 lives.⁵

The “structural” JI members – experienced operatives who reported up the chain of command to JI leaders in Indonesia – had been based since 2000 at a camp in Jabal Quba on Mt. Cararao in Lanao del Sur. After the 2002 Bali bombing, fugitives from Indonesia began arriving who were termed “non-structural” because they had no specific assignments and were more or less free agents. They included Indonesians Umar Patek and Dulmatin and KMM member Zulkifli bin Hir alias Marwan, who in 2003 established a separate camp in Pawas, in the Liguasan Marsh, under the protection of a senior MILF commander. Here, they trained anyone committed to jihad, regardless of organisational affiliation.⁶

Both the Jabal Quba and Pawas training camps welcomed ASG members. As U.S.-Philippine military operations intensified in Basilan and Jolo in 2003, key ASG leaders including Khadaffy Janjalani and Isnlon Hapilon moved first to Zamboanga, then to the Pawas camp where they stayed until expelled by the MILF in September 2005 in the interests of peace talks with the government.⁷

The ASG leaders moved back to Jolo after the expulsion but stepped up the activities of their Urban Terrorist Group (UTG). A series of raids and bombings by the UTG in Jolo and Zamboanga prompted the Philippines government to launch a new military offensive, Oplan Ultimatum, in August 2006 in response. One month later, Khadaffy Janjalani was killed in Sulu.

3 The alliance was cemented after Osama bin Laden’s brother moved to the Philippines to head the local chapter of an al-Qaeda-linked charity, the International Islamic Relief Organisation. The most spectacular of their planned attacks was to be the 1995 “Boyjinka plot”, involving the hijacking and bombing of eleven airliners flying from Asia to the U.S.

4 International Crisis Group (ICG), “The Philippines: Counter-insurgency vs. Counter-terrorism in Mindanao”, Asia Report No.152, 14 May 2008, p.6. After the Sipadan raid, the government of then President Joseph Estrada launched a military campaign that led to massive displacement in Jolo. MNLF fighters there were targeted as well, resulting in a retaliatory attack by supporters of Nur Misuari that killed eighteen soldiers. Misuari fled to Malaysia in November 2001, where he was arrested and deported in January 2002.

5 The Superferry attack involved a group of “reverts” to Islam known as the Rajah Solaiman Movement. See ICG, “Philippines Terrorism: The Role of Militant Islamic Converts”, Asia Report No.110, 19 December 2005.

6 See IPAC, “Killing Marwan in Mindanao”, Report No. 17, 5 March 2015, p.5-6. The non-JI groups whose members took part in the Pawas training included KOMPAK and several factions of Darul Islam.

7 See ICG, “Counter-Insurgency vs. Counter-Terrorism in Mindanao”, op.cit.

Radullon Sahiron, who had married Abdurazak Janjalani's widow, took over as commander, but he never had the same status.

In early 2007, another top ASG commander, Abu Sulaiman, was killed in a clash with government troops. This led to the collapse of the decision-making structure in ASG. Under Khadaffy and Abu Sulaiman, there had been a Majelis Shura, a kind of consultative leadership council for deciding on operations that included both Radullon Sahiron and Isnlon Hapilon, as well as a foreigner, Umar Patek. The Majelis never met again after Abu Sulaiman's death, and each of the subcommands or *majmuah* was left to operate more or less independently.

Many of the Basilan fighters in Sulu decided to return home and work there with Furuji Indama, a young ethnic Yakan with a self-confidence, if not arrogance, that enhanced his status. For the next several years, as the main story in Mindanao shifted to the peace process with the MILF, the ASG seemed to degenerate into highly factionalised kidnap-for-ransom groups, which provided employment, income and a sense of purpose for many youths with few other prospects.

The period from 2007 to the declaration of the Islamic state in Basilan was marked by a series of kidnappings (see Appendix I for a detailed list) and military or police operations against the suspected perpetrators. While the list of incidents suggests pure criminality, there was more going on.

A senior ASG-Basilan operative and Saudi-trained preacher, Khair Mundos, had been arrested in 2004, but escaped in a well-coordinated assault in February 2007 on the prison where he was being held.⁸ Mundos found his way to Jolo but at Isnlon Hapilon's urging, eventually returned to Basilan as amir, with Furuji Indama and Nur Hassan Jamiri, who ran the "children of martyrs" group, as his main subcommanders.⁹ Both kept the kidnappings-for-ransom going as a source of income and combat training for recruits. Mundos complained that Furuji refused to take his advice and did not want to acknowledge anyone as his superior – which raises some interesting questions about Furuji's current relationship with Isnlon.¹⁰

Then, in May 2010, Isnlon Hapilon moved back to Basilan. He had the seniority to unite the Basilan members, though Furuji Indama was still the leader with the family ties to many of the fighters. His return seemed to mark a more definitive break with Radullan Sahiron and the semi-autonomous subcommanders operating out of Sulu.¹¹

One man who knows Radullan and Isnlon well said the two were very different. Radullan was closed to outsiders, thought foreigners only brought trouble, and trusted only fellow Tausug. It was not surprising that he saw no value in joining ISIS. Isnlon, by contrast, "has always liked anything that smelled foreign, especially anything from the Middle East."¹² His affiliation to ISIS, the same source said, is motivated not by ideology but by a desire for the prestige of being part of a Middle Eastern organisation. Isnlon's status may also have been enhanced by his marriage to Marwan's widow -- whose first husband was Khadaffy Janjalani.

8 "Initial Custodial Debriefing of Termiji Ahmad@Imran", 16 May 2013. One of the organisers of the jailbreak in Kidapawan was Salahuddin Hassan, a senior member of the al-Khobar Group, an MILF splinter group renowned for its terror attacks, another example of ASG's alliances.

9 Information about Jamiri from interview with government official, Zamboanga City, 5 October 2016. See also "Debriefing of ASG Top Ranking Leader KHAIR MUNDOS y MALBAN," op.cit.

10 Ibid.

11 Khair Mundos by this time had already moved to a less active role and was moving around ASG and MILF areas as an itinerant preacher. He was eventually recaptured in June 2014 in Paranaque City near the Manila airport.

12 IPAC interview, Indonesian who fought in Mindanao, 22 October 2016.

B. The Story of Jamil Ajilul and Termidji Talad alias Emran

The ties that bind the ASG in Basilan can be seen from the story of two men arrested in 2014 for their role in the 2011 kidnapping of US national Gerfa Lunsman. They were arrested before ASG declarations of support for ISIS began, but their backgrounds may be typical of the men now with Isnilon Hapilon. Their trajectory shows the importance of clan ties and the power of revenge as a motivating force. It also shows the need to understand the linkages between the Basilan-Zamboanga Urban Terrorist Group (UTG) and the pro-ISIS groups in Mindanao.

Jamil Habirulla Ajilul aka Gadzie Abirulla Ajilul was born on 21 October 1994 in Buenavista, Zamboanga. His father was Amilhamja Ajilul alias Alex Alvarez, first head of the local UTG, who was killed in a military operation in Zamboanga on 11 April 2006, when Jamil was 12.

Jamil's uncle, Abdulla Ajilul alias Abu Termijie, was a close friend of ASG founder Abdurajak Janjalani, entrusted by him with building up the ASG in Basilan. Toward the end of the 1990s, Janjalani reportedly asked Abdulla Ajilul to find someone who could lead the UTG in Zamboanga City. Abdulla gave the assignment to his younger brother, Jamil's father, and thus began a series of ASG attacks around Zamboanga city, starting with the Shop-O-Rama bombings on 7 October 2002 that killed seven and wounded 150. As operations against the UTG intensified and Amilhamja was eventually killed, Abdulla moved from Zamboanga to Basilan, where he became first the chief security escort of Tipo-Tipo mayor Joel Maturan, then the overseer of Maturan's coconut and rubber plantations. In 2008, a military unit tracked Abdulla down at a plantation and killed him. Abdulla's son and Jamil's first cousin, Marzan Ajilul, inherited the UTG job until he too was killed; Marzan's brother also died in a military operation. In a short space of time, therefore, Jamil lost his father, uncle and two cousins, and it would have been surprising if he himself had chosen a different path.

Two years after her husband's death, Jamil's mother, Misba Ajilul, left for Doha, Qatar to work as a maid, leaving her children with her sister-in-law for the next four years. While she was gone, Jamil became active in ASG; the Lunsman kidnapping, for which he has since been convicted, was his first major operation, a few months short of his sixteenth birthday. Photos of the some two dozen youths involved in the operation show most to be very young, many of them part of the extended family of Furuji Indama.¹³

A few Zamboanga-based MILF men were also reportedly involved in the 2011 operation, notably Amir Mingkong and Waning Abdusalam, a former member of the MILF Special Operations Group.¹⁴ The organizational boundary between Furuji Indama's ASG men and these MILF operatives was decidedly blurred.

When the Lunsman kidnapping case was over, Jamil joined an MILF kidnapping gang operating out of Tunawan, Zamboanga led by Esmael "Tago" Pingli – who in turn worked for Waning Abdusalam. He also used his share of the Lunsman ransom money – P7000 [about \$155] – to woo and win Esmael's daughter, Nida. He then took part with his father-in-law in the kidnapping of an ethnic Chinese businessman, Lin Yuan-Kai. On 20 September 2012, the AFP mounted an operation in Curuan, Zamboanga, in which Lin was unexpectedly freed (the AFP

13 In addition to Furuji Indama, the group included Patik Samson alias Mauck, a former migrant worker in Malaysia; Sherhan Akalin alias Otto alias Phadz Hataman; Radznil Jannatul-Khubaib alias Meng alias Mamin from Bato Maputi, Baguindan, Tipo-Tipo, a fluent Malay speaker; Gulam/Gulang; Tarik; Tirone; Omor; Alec/Alex; Mukmal/Mokmar; Hadja; Abu Bassom from Ungkaya Pukan; Muadz alias Ramiji Ajilul; Famar Sakibul alias Dais alias Abu Azzam; Abdula Limaya alias Japhil/Jafil from Bgy Ginanta, al-Barka; Waib alias Begote; Solar alias Abu Tolha; Moktar, a subordinate of Solar; Keyes; Boray; Idol alias Mudzri, project financier who collected the ransom money from an ATM; and Papang, father of Idol, from Surgkayo, Unkaya Pukan, who hosted the victims at one point during their abduction.

14 Mingkong's collaboration with the ASG goes back at least as far as 2002 and probably further. See ICG, "Philippines Terrorism: The Role of Militant Islamic Converts," op.cit., p.11.

did not know he was there) but Jamil's wife Nida was killed.

Jamil began spending more time with Jaujin Salam, commander of the MILF's 103rd Base Command in Siocon, Zamboanga. In September 2013, he married Jaujin's daughter, Nur Aini Salam, who worked for the medical staff of the camp. They had less than a year together before Jamil was arrested. He told police that he had left the ASG and joined the MILF in 2012, angered by Furuji Indama's treatment of captured soldiers.

There are clearly many holes in Jamil's account and his professed horror at Furuji's brutality may need to be taken with a grain of salt. Still, it is interesting how easily he moved between Basilan ASG and the Zamboanga-based MILF.

The story of Meijing Tama alias Emran is even more revealing.¹⁵ He was born Termidji Talad y Ahmad in Lukuban, Pilas, a small island off the coast of Basilan, on 18 December 1984. An ethnic Tausug of the Bangingi clan, he was reportedly related through his father to Abu Sulaiman (one account says he was the nephew). Both his parents worked in Sandakan, Malaysia. In 2002, after he had completed one year of high school, he was invited by his father's first cousin, Ustadz Tudi, also known at Uttot Bairo, join the ASG in Patikul, Sulu.

Accordingly, in late 2002, Emran joined a group of 37 recruits that underwent a 45-day training course in Sulu under the direct instruction of Khadaffy Janjalani. When it was over, Emran traveled by boat with almost 100 other armed ASG led by Khadaffy, Isnilon Hapilon and Abu Sulaiman to Sibuco, Zamboanga del Norte where training continued. Khadaffy and the others by this time were working with a few Indonesian and Malaysian JI leaders in pursuit of alliances that would extend their reach beyond ASG's traditional strongholds.¹⁶

In 2005, Emran spent six months at the Pawas camp, run by the "non-structural" JI. He returned to Indanan, Sulu in 2006 where he joined fifteen fighters around Khadaffy Janjalani, and he was in the immediate area when Khadaffy was killed in September.

Emran then decided to return to Basilan and join the group around Furuji Indama, his cousin. Sometime in late 2008 or early 2009, Furuji ran his own 45-day training course in Baguindan, Tipo-Tipo, mostly for his own relatives, in which Emran took part. The instructors included Khair Mundos and Salahuddin Hassan. Hasan was a member of al-Khobar group, a breakaway group from the MILF that frequently worked with the foreign jihadis.

In 2013 Emran, who had married a Muslim convert named Mary Joy, was visiting his in-laws when he received a call from one Ustadz Munar, inviting him to Marawi City for a religious meeting (*tabligh*). He was arrested there on 11 May 2013.

C. ISIS in Basilan

Less than a month after al-Baghdadi proclaimed the creation of Islamic State on 29 June 2014, a video appeared on YouTube of Isnilon Hapilon leading some 30 fighters in a pledge of allegiance (*bai'ah*) to the new caliph.¹⁷

In May 2015, some 50 fighters, reportedly involving several Malaysians, were involved in an attack on a police station in Hadji Mohammad Ajul Municipality, and other attacks followed.

In December 2015, a Philippine army unit in Macalang, al-Barka clashed with one of the ASG-Basilan units. In the fighting, three soldiers and about a dozen ASG fighters were killed, including, on 16 December, one of the Malaysians known for his bomb-making skills, Mohammed Najib Hussein, alias Abu Anas al-Muhajir. A video of Abu Anas's "martyrdom"

¹⁵ The information here comes from his case dossier in Regional Trial Court IX, Zamboanga City.

¹⁶ One such alliance was with the MILF's Abu Suffia group operating out of Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat.

¹⁷ "Ustaj Isnilon gives bay'ah to Amir Al-Mu'Mineen", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ceiRgx3j6M>, posted 24 July 2014.

appeared almost immediately on Furat Media, part of the ISIS media conglomerate.¹⁸

By this time, Isnlon reportedly was trying to set up a kind of mini-Islamic state in parts of Basilan. People were only allowed to go out to their farms if they swore a *bai'ah*, and Isnlon's men destroyed their crops of those who would not do so, including some of the island's big plantation owners whose land was declared the "property of Allah". One man who incurred losses was Joel Maturan, the man who had once been UTG's protector.¹⁹

On 4 January 2016, the jihadi forum Shumukh al-Islam released a video showing the unification of four pro-ISIS groups in the Philippines under Isnlon's leadership. These included Isnlon's own forces, called by ASG's original name of Al-Harakat al-Islamiyah Battalion; Ansarul Khilafah, led by Commander Tokboy alias Abu Sharifa/Shareefa; the Ansar al-Shariah Battalion, led by the Malaysian Abu Anas above, indicating the video was filmed before the December 2015 clash; and a small delegation from the Ma'rakah al-Ansar Battalion based in Sulu and led by "Abu Ammar". This group reportedly later joined Isnlon in Basilan, leaving no organised pro-ISIS unit in Sulu.

A transcript of the video suggested that the ISIS leadership in Syria had officially anointed Isnlon:

Sheikh Abu Abdullah Ustadz Isnlon Hapilon is recently named by the Council (Ahlus Shura) to be our overall emir in the Philippines. He is the emir of Al Harakatul al-Islamiyah in Basilan, which was headed previously by our martyred Sheikh Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani (may Allah bestow his mercy upon him). And this is brother Abu Anas Almuahjir, emir of Ansar Sharia Battalion. Here is another brother Abu Haris from the Ma'rakapt Al-Ansar Battalion in Sulu, whose leader is brother Abu Ammar.

All of these battalions have previously pledged allegiance to the Caliph. May Allah protect him. At this point in time, we will declare our pledge of allegiance to be led by our new leader brother Ustadz Abu Abdullah. May Allah reward him well.²⁰

In April 2016, the military and Isnlon's fighters clashed again in Sitio Bayoko, Tipo-Tipo, this time killing eighteen soldiers. Among the dead on the ASG side was a Moroccan trainer, Mohammad Khattab, raising questions about whether he had been sent from Syria and whether communications and cooperation with ISIS were actually more extensive than originally thought.²¹

In June, as military operations in Basilan continued, a new video emerged from ISIS, this time with Indonesian, Malaysian and Filipino fighters in Syria declaring allegiance to Isnlon as *amir* of the Southeast Asian fighters. This recognition appeared to be a preliminary step to declaring a Southeast Asian province (*wilayat*) of Islamic State, but that declaration had not been made as of late October 2016.

In July, an air force bombing strike in Baguindan, Tipo-Tipo was reported to have critically wounded Furuji Indama, which would have been a severe blow to Isnlon's forces. He was evacuated by other ASG fighters to Sulu and by October 2016 was reported to be alive and well and back in Basilan.²² Isnlon's son, Ubaida, was killed in the same clash.

By August, the government was claiming that its forces – by one estimate now totalling some

18 "IS Releases Video of Malaysian Militant Minutes after He Was Shot," The Star (Malaysia), 16 February 2016.

19 IPAC interview with local journalist, Zamboanga, 5 October 2016.

20 "Experts warn PH: Don't underestimate ISIS", www.rappler.com, 13 January 2016.

21 "Militant Moroccan bomb expert among killed in Basilan clash, www.philstar.com, 10 April 2016.

22 The airstrike, conducted by the 15th Strike Wing of the Philippine Air Force, reportedly wounded Abu Haysam, Abu Maid, Abu Hattam, Abu Gaber, Abu Muadz and Abu Abugan. See "ASG Leader Indama Reported Wounded; Seeking Treatment", www.gma.network.com, 18 July 2016.

6,000 combined police and military in Basilan alone – had led to the splintering of the ASG on Basilan and had pushed Isnilon and his inner circle back from al-Barka to an area around Sumisip.²³ In addition, ASG ammunition supplies were said to be running low.

The provincial Basilan government, meanwhile, built on the backlash against Isnilon Hapilon's efforts at Islamisation and claimed to have successfully organised mayors against ASG, including by recruiting and arming a civilian auxiliary called the Barangay Peacekeeping Action Team (BPAT) that joined in military operations. Governor Jim Hataman dismissed any concern that arms or ammunition could leak from the BPAT back to the ASG, saying that members were carefully vetted and most were ASG victims.²⁴ Still, armed auxiliaries do not have a good track record as a conflict resolution tool in Mindanao and often have made things worse. If Isnilon's men get access to new funds, the BPAT could be one source of supplies.

D. The Malaysian Connection

The Basilan ASG also has the Malaysian wild card. It has always had close ties to Sandakan and Sabah where many from Basilan work as plantation labor or construction coolies, and the Malaysian connection has been a source for years for personnel and funding. Many of the families with relatives in Sandakan also had family members in Saudi Arabia – the Mundos family (Khair and his brother Borhan) moved easily back and forth to Riyadh, Sandakan and Basilan in the early to mid-2000s. Later a network of Darul Islam members in Sabah, many of them based in Tawao and linked to Indonesian DI factions in Makassar and East Kalimantan, developed their own ties to ASG, both in Basilan and Sulu. Two of these men have been reported working with Isnilon Hapilon:

- Jeknal Adil, held from 2006 to 2009 under Malaysia's ISA on suspicion of links to the Sabah Darul Islam network, was first reported to be in Basilan in 2012. Born in Tawao of Tausug parents, he apparently never had full Malaysian nationality but instead permanent residency (PR) status.
- Amin Baco, a Malaysian national from Tawao, of Bugis descent, is married into a prominent ASG family in Sulu. (His father-in-law is Hatib Sawadjaan, head of an ASG faction known as the Tanum Group.) He has moved around as an instructor, including to the AKP.

While Philippine officials frequently refer to Amin Baco as a JI member, he is rather part of the Darul Islam (DI) network in Sabah.²⁵ In 2003, when Umar Patek and Marwan set up the Pawas camp, Amin Baco was responsible for meeting Indonesians in Tawao or Sebatik Island and bringing them to Pawas for training, though he never stayed there. His younger brother Karim, however, did stay with Umar Patek and Dulmatin until he was killed in June 2005 in Talayan.

23 Interview with local journalist, Zamboanga, 5 October 2016 and "ARMM Governor: Alleged ISIS Members Aiding Abu Sayyaf," www.philstar.com, 18 September 2016.

24 IPAC text exchange with Governor Jim Hataman, 8 October 2016.

25 In 1993 when Jemaah Islamiyah broke with DI, a DI leader named Mohd. Taufiqur Rahman alias Akram from Java set up a cell in Tawao to facilitate transit to the Philippines for training. When the Ambon conflict erupted in Indonesia in 1999, the Tawao cell sent men to fight. One of these was Amin Baco, who went with his younger brother, Karim. While in Ambon, he used the name Hasan. After the Walisongo massacre in Poso in 2000, Amin Baco went for training first to Mangkutana, Luwu, South Sulawesi and then to Pendolo, on the shore of Lake Poso where jihadis from several different organizations (Ring Banten, Laskar Jundullah, DI, JI, KOMPAK) had camps – among them several who have since declared support for ISIS.

In 2011, Amin Baco was still facilitating the travel of DI members to Mindanao for training and arms purchases.²⁶

More interesting, and more dangerous because better educated and more ideological, are the Malaysians who linked up with the Basilan ASG from peninsular Malaysia. They include three from the Johor/Selangor area who left as a group for Mindanao on 22 April 2014:

- Dr Mahmud Ahmad, alias Abu Handzalah about 36, from Batu Caves, Selangor, formerly a lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Malaya.
- Muhammad Joraimee Awang Raimee alias Abu Nur, then 39, from Selayang, Selangor and a member of the Selayang municipal council.
- Mohd. Najib bin Husein alias Abu Anas al-Muhajir, 38, the man who was killed in December 2015. He ran a stationery store on the University of Malaya campus before moving to Mindanao.

Of the three, Abu Anas was clearly the most important. A Telegram message circulated just weeks before his death, written by an outraged fellow fighter on Basilan responding to a disparaging post about him, reads:

I am Abu al Farouq al-Filibini from Basilan in the Eastern Region of the Eastern Caliphate [IMARATU AL-MASHRIQI khilafah ash'sharqiyyah]. By God, our amir is officially Abu Anas, known in the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham as Abu Anas al-Muhajir. And the commander of the faithful, Abubakar Al-Baghdadi has declared that Abu Anas al-Muhajir and his group of Abu Sayyaf on Basilan are under the caliphate. This message was released by Abdulhakim ash-Shamiy, amir of the shura council of Islamic State.²⁷

Among other things this suggests that the ASG-Basilan leadership, including the Malaysians, were in communication with the highest levels of ISIS in Syria.

Another Malaysian, Muamar Gadafi, appears in a photograph taken in Mindanao with Mahmud Ahmad and Joraimee in front of an ISIS flag in 2015, but no information has come out about his background.²⁸ Yet another, Ahmad Tarmizi bin Moh. Sayuti, was arrested in Sumisip, Basilan in October 2016, according to the military.

It remains unclear whether the Malaysian named Mohamas Amin, who also goes by several aliases and who was arrested on 8 October in Quezon City, Manila, reportedly as he was planning to conduct a bomb attack in Manila, has direct links to Basilan in addition to his reported ties to Sulu.²⁹

26 The Darul Islam cell in question was led by Abu Umar; the man who actually purchased the arms was Achmad Izzmi alias Adam. Adam mentions "Baco" several times in his 7 July 2011 testimony to the Indonesian police, a copy of which was obtained by IPAC. He recounts being picked up in Tawao on 26 April 2011 and traveling with Baco and a Filipino named Basri first to Bongao, Tawi-tawi, then to Zamboanga and finally to Jolo where Abu Umar's son was already training with Abu Sayyaf and seemed to be personally under Baco's wing. The man known as Daeng Koro and Abu Autat (real name: Sabar Subagyo), killed in Poso on 3 April 2015, accompanied Farhan to Jolo. Farhan was killed shortly after his return to Indonesia after killing two policemen in Solo in August 2012. At the time he had made contact with Tim Hisbah, a group later associated with Bahrin Naim, a Solo native now in Syria. Baco could easily have established contact with Naim.

27 Telegram posting, 8 december 2015. Abu Anas was killed eight days later.

28 "Malaysians' Role in IS Southeast Asia", theheatmalaysia.com, 23 December 2015.

29 The aliases include Asman, Akman Amin and Amin Aklam. He was said to be a bomb expert and the subject of an arrest warrant filed at the Regional Trial Court in Jolo, Sulu. See "Philippines thwarts terror attack with arrest of Malaysian bomb expert planning strike in Manila," www.straitstimes.com, 11 October 2016.

The fact that Malaysians of the calibre of Abu Anas and Mahmud Ahmad were motivated to move to Basilan suggests that the attraction was jihad, and their commitment would likely have deepened with the pledge to ISIS. The extent of their communication with Malaysians in Syria, such as Muhammad Wannady and Rafi Udin, is not known, but it would be surprising if they were not in direct contact.

Malaysians, like other foreigners, have the advantage of not being bound by Philippine clan and family links, and they can move easily among different groups. They can provide expertise, international contacts and perhaps funding, but ASG-Basilan will have to continue to rely on local allies for military reinforcements.

E. Lessons Learned

We do not know the names of all those who joined Isnlon Hapilon when he declared his support for ISIS but they likely include many of the same young men who joined Jamil and Emran in the 2011 kidnapping – or their cousins, younger brothers or neighbours. Most will be ethnic Yakans. They will be loyal to both Isnlon and Furuji Indama, and that partnership is critical. The death or defection of Furuji would seriously weaken the Basilan contingent.

Blood ties and the power of vengeance mean that ASG-Basilan is not likely to be eradicated by military operations, however intensive. The spokesman for the military in Zamboanga said cheerfully, “Basilan is in the last phase of clearing.”³⁰ That was what the U.S. Special Forces thought a decade ago.

Moreover, Isnlon has many allies, including both ISIS and non-ISIS supporters, that he can call on. He reportedly ordered the 2 September Davao bombing in part as a diversionary tactic, to ease pressure on Sulu and Basilan, and he drew in another pro-ISIS group, the Mautes from Lanao del Sur and a Maute cell in Cotabato, as operatives (see below, section III). The non-ISIS support may come less from the Sulu ASG, since they are hard-pressed themselves, but more from some of same MILF leaders and kidnap-for-ransom groups who worked with the Basilan group in the past and whose members undoubtedly have some of the same desire for revenge against government troops that characterise the ASG’s “children of martyrs”.

Finally, while the international connections undoubtedly boost Isnlon Hapilon’s status, most of his fighters will wear their ideology lightly. Turning Basilan, or even a small part of Tipo-Tipo or Sumisip, into a salafi community is not going to fly. The Moroccan instructor killed in April was reportedly trying to train suicide bombers but got no takers.³¹ If there is to be a serious effort at a mass casualty attack in the name of ISIS, the core operatives are not likely to come from Basilan.

III. ANSARUL KHILAFAT PHILIPPINES (AKP) AND THE INDONESIAN CONNECTION

If Isnlon Hapilon has ISIS endorsement as the *amir* for Southeast Asia, then Ansarul Khilafat, originally based in Sarangani, may be the group with the closest links to fighters in Syria. It is now clear that AKP worked with the Maute group on the Davao market bombing; the shared ideological commitment has become an operational alliance.

AKP is led by Mohammad Jaafar Maguid alias Tokboy, known since he joined ISIS as Abu Sharifa. Tokboy had been in the MILF’s Special Operations Group (SOG) and the 105th base command under Ameril Umbra Kato. After the 2008 collapse of peace talks with the government, Tokboy left the MILF. He and his men were responsible for an attack in August 2008 in Maasim,

30 IPAC interview, spokesman for West Mindanao Command, Zamboanga, 5 October 2016.

31 Ibid.

Sarangani that left two civilians dead and for a series of robberies and other crimes. He was arrested in July 2009 in Maasim but escaped the provincial jail in March 2010 and has been on the loose ever since.³²

As Philippine forces pursued him, he transferred his operations to the area around Butril, Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat, but maintained followers in and around Sarangani; police raided a suspected camp in Maasim in April 2016, killing two suspected members in a firefight.³³

On 20 August 2016, three more suspected AKP members were killed by the police Special Action Force (SAF) in Daliao, Maasim when they were looking for Tokboy; a security official said there were reports that two Indonesians were in the group, but they never had confirmation.³⁴ Tokboy also reportedly was successful in recruiting students from a variety of campuses in General Santos City, Cotabato and even Lanao del Norte on the promise of getting them advanced religious training.³⁵ That recruitment among other things meant that Tokboy had access to social media expertise, even if the Philippines media continued to portray him as little more than a bandit.

Tokboy also has had two critically important connections that brought him directly in touch with ISIS in Syria. One was the Indonesian, Saifullah Ibrahim alias Ibrahim Ali alias Sucipto; the second is Mohamad Reza Kiram.

A. *Sucipto and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)*

When Ahmad Saifullah Ibrahim alias Ibrahim Ali alias Sucipto was killed in a battle with Philippine soldiers on 26 November 2015 in Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat, he had been released from prison for just under a year.³⁶ He had become a conduit for funding through Indonesia, a source of weapons for the small but tenacious Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (Mujahidin Indonesia Timur, MIT) led by the late Santoso; and a direct link into Katibah Nusantara, ISIS's Malay-speaking Indonesian-led fighting unit in Syria.

Saifullah Ibrahim had a classic Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) upbringing. He was born in Batang, Central Java on 14 August 1974 and studied at several JI-affiliated schools, including Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's Al-Mukmin boarding school (*pesantren*) in Ngruki, Solo. He was formally inducted into JI in 1994 at the age of 20; four years later, he left for military training at Camp Hudaibiyah, the JI camp set up in alliance with the MILF in central Mindanao. He stayed on as an instructor there in 1999 and served as head of JI's administrative structure in Mindanao, Wakalah Hudaibiyah, from 2002 to mid-2003 while also serving as head of the Jabal Quba training camp. Saifullah would have known Tokboy during this period.

In 2002, Saifullah and his fellow Indonesian and former classmate at Ngruki, Ahmad Faisal bin Imam Sarijan alias Zulkifli alias Danny Ofresio, were involved in the bombing of Fitmart stores, first in Tacurong in March, then in General Santos city in April. These bombings, the second of which killed fifteen people, marked the "structural JI"'s move beyond its traditional MILF allies to embrace the ASG as partners in an actual operation, though MILF elements were

32 "Sarangani jail personnel sacked for escape of detainees, www.mindanews.com, 14 October 2014.

33 "2 Suspected Ansar Khilafa Terror Group Members Killed in Sarangani," InterAksyon.com, 29 April 2016.

34 IPAC interview, Philippine government official, Cotabato, 10 October 2016.

35 Ibid.

36 Saifullah Ibrahim was released from the Security Intensive Care Area, Taguig City, Philippines on 5 December 2014.

involved as well.³⁷

In June 2003, JI headquarters summoned Zulkifli back to Indonesia to assume a senior command. Accompanied by Saifullah, the two men were caught by Malaysian police in September 2003 after entering Sabah and detained under the Internal Security Act. They were held in Kamunting Detention Centre until 2005, when they were extradited to the Philippines to face charges for the Fitmart bombings.

Among the other detainees in Kamunting at the time were two men who later assume important roles. One is Malaysian national Mohamad Rafi Udin, held in Kamunting from 2004 to 2006; Rafi left for Syria in February 2014 and has subsequently appeared in ISIS recruitment videos, including in June 2016. He is one of several links between Saifullah and ISIS personnel.³⁸ The second is an ASG fighter named Sufian bin Sali from Tawi-Tawi, picked up in a sweep in Sabah in December 2003 and officially detained under the ISA in Feb 2004. He was released in 2009 and eventually joined Tokboy.

Saifullah and Zulkifli were held in the “maximum security” Camp Crame in Manila after their return in 2005. They joined three Indonesians who had been arrested in Zamboanga in December 2004 for bringing in funds with the intent of setting up a new training site for the Mindanao jihad. The money was to be given to the foreign fighters, including Dulmatin and Marwan, who at this point were still with the MILF around the Liguasan Marsh.

The three Indonesians arrested in Zamboanga were Mohd Karim Yusop Faiz, now better known through ISIS recruitment videos as “Abu Walid”; Didi Resdiana alias Ted Yolanda from the West Java-based group known as Ring Banten; and Nasir Hamid, from South Sulawesi.³⁹ They were charged with illegal possession of explosives and weapons. Faiz had served with the organisation called KOMPAK in Ambon in 2000 and may well have known Rafi Udin there. He then had gone to study in Saudi Arabia; the funds he was carrying were reportedly from a Saudi donor.

Faiz, Didi and Nasir were finally tried in 2013, after nine years in prison, and acquitted on procedural grounds in December 2013.⁴⁰ They were deported back to Indonesia on 26 March 2014 and Faiz and Didi left almost immediately for Syria to join ISIS.⁴¹ Didi was killed there in March 2015; Faiz alias Abu Walid has apparently assumed a senior role.

Meanwhile, back in the Philippines, Saifullah Ibrahim and Zulkifli finally came to trial in 2014 for the Fitmart bombing. Zulkifli was convicted and sent to New Bilibid Prison Maximum

37 See ICG, “Southern Philippines Backgrounder: Terrorism and the Peace Process”, Asia Report No.80, 13 July 2004 for a full description of the Fitmart bombings and the personnel involved as well as for background on JI’s tactical decision to work with the ASG. See “Indonesian, 2 Filipinos Convicted in 2002 bombing”, Associated Press, 28 November 2014.

38 Rafi Udin is a former KMM member, who in 2000 had been sent by Indonesian national Hambali, former head of JI in Malaysia, to fight in Ambon, Maluku at the height of the communal conflict there. He stayed in Ambon until after the 2002 Bali bombing, then he was brought back to Palu, Central Sulawesi, where he was arrested on 22 April 2003 with a number of other senior JI operatives. He was later deported back to Malaysia and held under the ISA until his release in 2006. Two other KMM members released at the same time also went to Syria but were killed there: Moh. Lotfi Arifin, killed while fighting with Ajnad al-Sham in September 2014, and Zid Saharani who was killed with ISIS in Iraq in August 2015.

39 Ring Banten is a militant faction of Darul Islam whose member took part in both the 2002 Bali bombing and the 2004 Australian embassy attack in Jakarta. They had longstanding ties to JI and KMM through Bali bomber Imam Samudra. In September 2001, Zid Saharani, the cellmate of Rafi Udin in Kamunting, had been arrested in Pandeglang, Banten for giving military instruction to Ring Banten members. Mohammad Nasir Laode bin Hamid, was born in Sidrap, South Sulawesi, on 14 January 1980.

40 “QC court acquits 3 alleged JI members,” www.philstar.com, 10 December 2013. The judge said the weapons had been confiscated during an illegal search and therefore the 250 grams of TNT and weapon seized were inadmissible as evidence.

41 Before he left Java, Faiz married the widow of Bagus Budi Pranoto alias Urwah, an ex-JI associate of Noordin Top, who was killed in an Indonesian police operation after the Jakarta hotel bombings in 2009. She went with him. Nasir Hamid’s whereabouts are not known.

Security Co-Penal Colony on 14 July 2014. Saifullah, however, was acquitted and released, and immediately joined Marwan, the Malaysian KMM member, in Maguindanao.

Somewhere along the way, Saifullah also got married to a Maguindanon woman, Raida Alsree. Raida's bank account was used for the transfer of funds from Indonesia, reportedly on instruction of Indonesian ISIS leader Bahrumisyah in Syria, to purchase arms for Santoso in Poso.⁴² It is not clear when the funds were transferred, but it may have been just before Saifullah was released, because on 29 October 2014, an Indonesian from Bima, Nusa Tenggara Barat named Wahyudin alias Iron left for an AKP camp in Mindanao. All contacts with the AKP took place via Telegram. He stayed until 24 January 2015 and when he returned, he was carrying guns which he safely delivered.⁴³ Indonesian police arrested him in Poso in May 2015.

The day after Wahyudin left the Philippines, the debacle that came to be known as the Mamasapano Massacre took place – a botched counter-terrorism operation in central Maguindanao aimed at capturing Marwan. The incident, described in detail elsewhere, resulted in the torpedoing of what was to be the final step in the government peace process with the MILF.⁴⁴ For now, it is worth noting that shortly before the ill-fated raid took place, Saifullah was said to be with staying with Marwan and another target of the raid, Basit Usman.⁴⁵ Afterwards, he moved in with the AKP.

On 26 November 2015, Philippine Marines attacked an AKP camp in Bgy Butril, Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat. In the four-hour gunfight that followed, eight AKP members were killed, including Saifullah. Tokboy managed to escape. (One of the others killed was Datu Mungan Dilangalen, a 22-year-old computer engineering student from a well-to-do clan in Cotabato, who had dropped out of university to join the movement.)⁴⁶ One result of the clash was that a blog the AKP was running suddenly stopped; one of those killed may have been the primary operator.

A footnote to Saifullah's demise: after news of his death reached central Java, the Ngruki teacher who had inducted him into JI in 1994 went to the family's house to express condolences. The teacher was Abdur Rohim bin Abdul Fatih alias Abu Husna, a former JI member who had just been released from the maximum security Nusakambangan prison complex in August 2015, after completing his sentence on terrorism charges. Abu Husna, a close friend and cellmate of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's, had sworn allegiance to ISIS in 2014 while still in prison. Within days of his release, he had set up a new pro-ISIS group in Solo, Central Java called Katibul Iman with himself as amir. Whether there was any operational communication between Abu Husna and his former student is not known, but the teacher was clearly moved by news of Saifullah's "martyrdom".⁴⁷

B. Muhammed Reza Kiram, Another ISIS Link

The ISIS video posted on Youtube in June 2016, as noted, showed Rafi Udin, the Malaysian, and Abu Walid, the Indonesian, declaring their allegiance to Isnilon Hapilon. The third man to pledge his loyalty was an ethnic Tausug, Muhammed Reza Kiram, also known as Abdulrahman.

42 IPAC, "Disunity among Indonesian ISIS Supporters and the Risk of More Violence," Report No.25, 1 February 2016, p.9.

43 He had with him a Baby M-16 with four magazines; 200 bullets; an MK3 and 20 bullets; and 50 bullets and one magazine for an FN45 pistol. Trial dossier of Wahyudin alias Iron, East Jakarta District Court, testimony dated 2 June 2015.

44 See "Killing Marwan in Mindanao", op.cit.

45 IPAC interview with government official, Cotabato, 8 October 2016.

46 "Kin of ex-lawmaker killed in Sultan Kudarat clash," www.philstar.com, 28 November 2015.

47 See case dossier of Abdul Karim alias Abu Jundi, arrested 19 December 2015, in Sukoharjo, Solo, Central Java.

Kiram was well-established in extremist circles. He is thought to have been responsible for the Zamboanga bus bombing of September 2012; that bomb in turn had the same signature as the Makati bus explosion in January 2011 that killed four.⁴⁸

Kiram was also said to be close to Mohammad Noor Fikrie, 26, a native of Kedah, Malaysia, shot by police in Davao City on 14 December 2012 after he threatened to detonate a backpack bomb. Fikrie travelled back and forth between Sandakan and Zamboanga, and was reported to have contacts with Marwan and ASG leaders.⁴⁹ Kiram was seen in Marawi around December 2013 and also reportedly visited Malaysia that year. In 2014 he was reported to have been seen training AKP recruits together with Amin Baco.⁵⁰ Sometime thereafter he left for Syria via Japan, giving Tokboy another direct link to ISIS. His wife, a Muslim convert named Ellen Jen Tagulao Barriga, went with him.

C. *Lessons Learned*

The AKP has a long history of interaction with other jihadi groups in the region, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia. Some of those ties go back more than a decade and were forged in prison. They can easily be reactivated through social media and mobile phone links. Communications with ISIS members in Syria through Kiram, Rafi Udin, Abu Walid or others may help reinforce loyalty to Isnilon Hapilon or suggest new targets or tactics, although developments in Syria and Iraq in late 2016 may have made such communication increasingly difficult.

It is worth noting that the wives of the late Malaysian bombing suspect, Fikrie, and Kiram are both Muslim converts. There has been little systematic investigation of the revival of the Rajah Sulaiman Movement, which in the past had the capacity to carry attacks into the heart of Manila, and its ties to pro-ISIS groups, but those links could well go through women.

IV. THE MAUTE GROUP OR “IS-RANAO”

The Maute Group based in Lanao del Sur has the smartest, best-educated and most sophisticated members of all of the pro-ISIS groups in the Philippines. It is largely ethnic Maranao, and its stronghold is Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi City, where it has been able to attract students and teachers. The Maute connections, however, reach deep into the MILF aristocracy on the one hand and are well-established internationally on the other, with particularly strong links to Indonesia.

Omarkhayam Romato Maute went to study at al-Azhar in Egypt around 2000 and there met an Indonesian student, Minhati Madrais, whom he later married. None of his fellow students saw him as having any radical tendencies at all, and photographs show a young man enchanted by his baby daughters and playing with the growing family by the Red Sea. After graduation in 2009, he went back with his wife to her father's *pesantren*, Darul Amal in Bekasi, outside Jakarta, a conservative but not jihadi boarding school, where Omar taught for a while before returning

⁴⁸ Notes from an interview with police officer in Manila, July 2013, made available to IPAC October 2016.

⁴⁹ “Suspected terrorist slain in Davao was JI Facebook recruit, Malaysia news site says,” gmanetwork.com, 21 December 2012. Fikrie had worked in Malacca but left for Mindanao after divorcing his wife in 2011. He then married a local Muslim convert from Sorsogon, Bicol.

⁵⁰ Isis Study Group, “AFP, PNP Launch OP Against Ansar Khilafah Philippines-Senior Indonesian Jihadists Allegedly KIA,” fortunascormer.com, 27 November 2015. This information has not been independently confirmed by IPAC.

to Lanao.⁵¹ He is fluent in Indonesian and Arabic.

His brother Abdullah studied in Jordan and also is reported to have extensive ties in the Middle East.⁵² The group that started out as Khilafah Islamiyah Mindanao (KIM) may be the most dangerous of the groups operating in the Philippines today. It is also sophisticated in its use of social media, although one report suggested it had suddenly shut down its chats on Telegram around August 2016, perhaps for fear of infiltration.⁵³

The Maute group, which now calls itself IS-Ranao, has been responsible for several attacks, most notably the 2 September 2016 Davao market bombing. On 4 October 2016, three ethnic Maranao members of a Cotabato cell of IS-Ranao were arrested and presented to the media three days later. They were T.J. Tagadaya Macabalang alias Abu Tufael; Wendell Apostol Facturan alias Muraimin; and Musali Mustafa alias Abu Hurayra, and all were charged with illegal possession of firearms and ammunition. They told police the bombing was ordered by Isnilon Hapilon as amir of Daulah Islamiyah (Islamic State) and that the Maute group was assigned to carry it out. At least one member of Tokboy's AKP was also reported to be involved, and a military source believes BIFF may have helped out as well.⁵⁴

On the mobile phone of one of the three, police found a video of a gathering for Idul Fitri 2016 – the feast marking the end of Ramadan, the fasting month – in which several Maute brothers including Omar are seen with T.J. Macabalang and Tokboy in an old MILF camp in Butig that the Mautes took over.⁵⁵

A. *Old Links to Marwan and Sanusi*

Butig, Lanao del Sur, where the Maute group now operates, has been home for years to a large MILF camp, Camp Bushra. It was also not that far from the old JI training center in Jabal Quba, so there is a long history of armed activity in the area.

The Maute group reportedly began as a training unit set up by Marwan around 2011 or even earlier, called al-Ghuraba and briefly Jamaah Tawhid wal Jihad – the name used by the late Abu Musa Zarqawi in Iraq and later by the supporters of radical Indonesian cleric Aman Abdurrahman in Indonesia.

By 2012, it had become Khilafah Islamiyah Movement (KIM), initially reported to be led by one Ust. Humam Abdul Najid alias Wai but in fact the Mautes are believed to have been the organisers even then.⁵⁶ KIM was said to have been responsible for the 26 July 2013 bombing at a Cagayan de Oro bar and bistro that killed six.⁵⁷ After ISIS's recognition of Isnilon as amir, the Mautes began using the name "IS-Ranao" to indicate a division of the new as-yet-undeclared province of ISIS – just as BIFF became IS-Maguindanao and Isnilon Hapilon's territory was IS-Basilan.

The use of "KIM" as a name precedes the death of Ustadz Sanusi, the Indonesian who

51 Omar Maute's father-in-law is KH Madrais Hajar, head of the Bekasi branch of the Indonesian ulama council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI). He is an active member of the Kongres Umat Islam Bekasi that has been active in pro-shari'ah advocacy and led demonstrations against the Ahmadiyah minority and others seen as "deviant". There is no suggestion that KH Madrais endorses or is any way involved in his son-in-law's activity.

52 Two Jordanians were reported having delivered a briefcase to the Maute's main camp in 2013, but officials were never able to determine who they were or what was in the briefcase. IPAC interview with government official, Cotabato, 10 October 2016.

53 IPAC interview in Cotabato, 9 October 2016.

54 "Raps set vs Davao blast suspects", *Manila Times*, 10 October 2016.

55 Parts of the video were aired by a Manila television station and can be seen on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luKv_xclaaU.

56 Email exchange with Philippine security officer, Cotabato, 21 October 2016.

57 See "3 cells compose shadowy group blamed for CDO blast," *Mindanews*, 15 August 2013.

reportedly became a mentor to the Maute brothers.⁵⁸ For the six years he was based in Lanao until his death in a police operation at MSU on 21 November 2012, Sanusi would have had ample time to build connections between local jihadis like the Mautes and his different networks: JI friends from Central Java, including possible donors; fellow alumni of Jabal Quba; contacts in Poso; and fellow fugitives in Mindanao like Marwan.

Indeed, in a press conference after Sanusi was killed, police said that six other “JI members” had managed to escape, although Philippine officials tend to use “JI” to refer to any Southeast Asian and especially any Indonesian.⁵⁹ They said Sanusi was facing criminal charges in Sarangani Province and that arrest warrants for him on murder and arson charges were outstanding.⁶⁰ (Sarangani is Tokboy’s territory, raising questions as to whether Sanusi had been working with him too.)

Sanusi was from Tegal, Central Java, but little more is known about his family. Immediately after he was killed, there were rumours circulating, later proved untrue, that he was married to the daughter of the late Alim Abdulaziz Mimbantas, a senior MILF commander, of whom more below.

The Mautes were still using KIM as their name when on 2 November 2013 they went see Abdullah Makapaar, better known as Commander Bravo, head of the MILF’s 102nd Base Command in Lanao del Norte. They asked for space to train in Balindong, Lanao del Sur which was within the 102nd BC’s territory. Bravo agreed but assigned a subordinate to monitor the training. When a report came back to Bravo that there was a link to terrorism – not clear what it was – he reportedly told the Mautes they would have to leave. They then moved to Lumbaca-Unayan, Lanao del Sur, but the military were close behind. They moved again. By 2014, they were in Ragayan, Poctan, Butig that became their base.

Commander Bravo, who led a series of attacks after the collapse of peace talks in 2008 that left 38 dead, has reportedly told anyone who will listen that he is worried about the loyalty of his men if there is no progress toward peace, but he himself appears to be solidly behind the current MILF leadership.

B. Family Ties and Relations with the MILF

In addition to their international connections and high level of education, the Mautes’ leadership may be derived from their family connections. They are related by marriage to one of the most respected families in the MILF – the Mimbantas clan of Lanao del Sur. Those ties may have helped the Mautes recruit younger MILF members, though Jannati Mimbantas, commander of the MILF’s Northeast Mindanao Front, has been at pains to disassociate his family from the Mautes and has assisted the government in its operations against them.

The connection is as follows. Jannati Mimbantas is the brother of the late Alim Abdulaziz Mimbantas, once the MILF’s vice-chairman for internal affairs and said to be the most trusted

58 Sanusi alias Ishak was an Indonesian JI member who had taken part in JI’s training program in Jabal Quba, probably around 2003 (in which case, he might have been at there at the same time as Khadaffy Janjalani). He went to Poso briefly in 2004, then went back to Java, but he returned to Poso just before Ramadan 2005 (around early October). It was he who reportedly had the idea for giving the Christians in Poso an end-of-Ramadan “surprise” which turned out to be the beheading of three schoolgirls, though he did not take part in the act itself. After police arrested the major perpetrators in early 2006, JI operations were exposed and in late 2006, Sanusi fled back to the area of the Philippines he knew best, Lanao del Sur. There he reportedly went by the name of Ibnu Gholib alias Jitli (Jet Lee) and was frequently on the MSU campus in Marawi.

59 “Indon terrorist killed in Southern Philippines,” *Mindanao Examiner*, 23 November 2012. The tendency to refer to all Southeast Asian fighters as JI is not only inaccurate but it prevents officials from identifying important linkages back to groups operating in their own countries.

60 Ibid.

associate of MILF founder Salamat Hashim.⁶¹ When Hashim died in 2003, many thought Mimbantas would succeed him, perhaps including Mimbantas. In the end the MILF's current leader, El-Haj Murad, became chairman and Mimbantas took over Murad's role as head of military affairs until his death from a stroke in 2012. Alim Mimbantas's second wife was Azisa Romato; Omar and Abdullah are her first cousins, so Omar's name on his Facebook page is Omarkhayam Romato Maute.

Jannati reportedly claims that the Mautes had been MILF members but became disillusioned by the failure of the Philippine Congress to approve the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL).⁶² In fact, the Mautes' attraction to extremism long predates the Mamasapano incident that threw passage of the BBL off course. There is some evidence, however, that younger MILF fighters in the area have been attracted to a fresher, more militant, more internationally-connected group which happens to be led by ethnic Maranao. In April 2016, the Mautes claimed to have recruited 100 MILF members, though such a large round figure is neither reliable nor verifiable. One man reported killed fighting with the Mautes in clashes that took place in Butig in late May and early June 2016 was Nawawie "Wowie" Mimbantas, son of Alim Abdulaziz.⁶³

The military in early October 2016 was adamant that not only was the MILF not assisting the Mautes in any way, but it was actively cooperating with the army against them. Before the army's 103rd Infantry Brigade began a new wave of operations against the Mautes in May, Jannati Mimbantas helped it to reposition 1,250 members of his fighters away from the area. It was not just that he did not want to be suspected of ties to his nephews, but he also reportedly did not want to be put in the position of confronting his own relatives.⁶⁴

C. *Strength of the Mautes*

The Mautes have shown an ability to absorb what would seem to be major losses in clashes with the police and military, suggesting that their organisation is larger and better organised than perhaps they have been given credit for. On 20 February 2016, the military began an eleven-day offensive after the Mautes' fighters attacked the army's 51st Infantry Battalion. In the initial attack, two soldiers and six attackers were killed; among the latter was an Indonesian identified as Mohammad Muktar, although it may not have been his real name and no one has ever identified him further. In the days of fighting that followed, BIFF fighters reportedly came to the Mautes' support. When it was over, the military claimed to have killed 54.⁶⁵

In April, the Mautes seized six sawmill workers in Butig and later beheaded two of them, allegedly for having links to the military. When the victim's bodies were found, they were wearing orange clothes, as if to mimic ISIS executions.

Then in May 2016, the military claimed to have killed more than 30 members of the group "in continuous bombardment of the bandits' lair."⁶⁶

On 22 August, police arrested eight members of the Maute group, including one of its leaders Hashim Balawag Maute, in Lumbayanague, Lanao del Sur, on charge of carrying guns and bombs. Five days later, a group of 20 armed men raided the Lanao del Sur provincial jail in

61 ICG, "Southern Philippines Backgrounder", op.cit., p.9.

62 "The Ties that Bind MILF and Maute Group", ABS-CBN News, 3 March 2016.

63 "Operations on hold for Ramadan", *Manila Times*, 4 June 2016. The Mautes' claim to have recruited 100 appears in the same article. "Wowie"'s death was denied by the family but confirmed to IPAC by a military spokesman.

64 IPAC interview, government official, Cotabato, 10 October 2016.

65 "Indigenous Maranaws dislocated by Firefight between Military and Jihadist Group", www.philstar.com, 30 May 2016. Other reports put the army's claim at 24.

66 "39 killed in military's '2nd wave' of operations vs. Maute Group in Lanao Sur", www.gmanetwork.com, 30 May 2016.

Marawi City and freed all eight, plus fifteen other inmates.⁶⁷ The prison attackers easily overcame the twelve guards and broke the locks of the cells where the five men and three women were being held. “A chicken coop has better locks,” one official remarked.⁶⁸

None of these earlier clashes, however, prepared the government for the Davao market bombing or for the discovery of a cell of ethnic Maranao in Cotabato.

V. BANGSAMORO ISLAMIC FREEDOM FIGHTERS (BIFF)

BIFF swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi after the caliphate was announced in mid-2014, but in January 2016 when four pro-ISIS groups in the Philippines announced their unification under Isnailon Hapilon, BIFF was not among them.⁶⁹ The group that had once been seen as a likely standard-bearer of the jihadist cause seemed to have faded into the background after the death of its founder, Ameril Umbra Kato in April 2015.

Kato, who had been commander of the MILF’s 105th Base Command in the Liguasan Marsh area of central Mindanao, first broke with the MILF command structure in 2008. An interim agreement with the government defining the territory of a Bangsamoro sub-state had collapsed on the eve of its signing, and Kato led his men in a string of violent attacks in protest that led to a warrant for his arrest.⁷⁰ His differences with MILF leaders deepened as he believed they had betrayed him by failing to insist that charges against him be dropped before any negotiations with the government resumed. Even after he announced the creation of BIFF in a video dated 6 December 2010, he still claimed he was loyal to the MILF as an institution but accused Murad and others of having abandoned the jihad for independence in favour of unwarranted concessions. Eventually the split became irreparable, even though the forces of BIFF and the 105th BC were too inter-related to ever be fully separated.

In addition to differences over strategy and objectives, BIFF and the MILF differed over their approach to jihad. The MILF wanted nothing to do with men like Marwan who only made life more difficult for them and led to accusations that it was “coddling” terrorists. Kato, a religious scholar and more ideologically inclined, was more sympathetic.

Over the years, he had worked closely with Khadaffy Janjalani, Marwan, fugitive Bali bombers Dulmatin and Umar Patek and others and was always willing to offer refuge. In 2013, Marwan moved back to Maguindanao to live under Kato’s protection as the manhunt to track him down intensified. It was here where the police Special Action Force launched their disastrous “Operation Exodus” and killed Marwan on 25 January 2015. MILF fighters, not informed of the operation beforehand though a protocol for doing so was well-established, joined BIFF fighters in surrounding the police, killing 44 and seizing dozens of weapons. Eighteen MILF fighters and five civilians also died.

Kato only survived Marwan by a few months. After his death, Esmael Abubakar alias Kumander Bungos was named as BIFF head in line with a letter found from Kato, designating him as successor. Bungos, former head of political affairs for BIFF, studied in the Middle East and is said to be an expert in Islamic law; he also previously served as head of the MILF’s 105th

67 Those sprung, in addition to Hashim Maute, were Abdul Jabbar Tominaman Macabading; Jamil Batoa Amerul; Muhammad Sianodin Mulok; Omar Khalil; Nasifa Pundug, the Hashim Maute’s wife; Hafidah Romato Maute; and Norhanna Balawag Maute. See “Terrorists Raid Marawi Jail,” www.inquirer.net, 29 August 2016.

68 IPAC interview, Cotabato, 11 October 2016.

69 In August 2014, BIFF spokesman Abu Misry Mama told the media, “We have an alliance with the Islamic State and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.” See “BIFF, Abu Sayyaf pledge allegiance to Islamic State jihadists,” gmanetwork.com, 16 August 2014.

70 On the 2008 collapse and its implications, see ICG, “The Philippines: The Collapse of Peace in Mindanao,” Asia Briefing No.83, 23 October 2008.

BC. Another senior commander, Imam Minimbang alias Kumander Kagi (Haji) Karialan, a relative of Kato's, apparently had expected to be named but had to settle for chief of military affairs.

Bungos has reportedly moved BIFF into closer alignment with the Maute group and the pro-ISIS alliance, so that the Mautes now reportedly refer to BIFF as "IS-Maguindanao" just as they refer to themselves as "IS-Ranao". In May-June when the military moved against the Mautes in Lanao del Sur, Bungos reportedly sent a platoon of fighters to help out.⁷¹

Karialan, however, reportedly became unhappy that Bungos had moved towards an even closer alignment of BIFF with ISIS, so he and a number of BIFF clerics broke with the new chief in July 2016. In a radio announcement aired in Cotabato on 21 July, a man calling himself Abu Amir explained:

They are now so identified with ISIS while we are not. We are loyal to the cause of the Moro people and we adhere to the teachings on the Qur'an which we do not circumvent to suit bad interests [sic].⁷²

One analysis suggested that Karialan could command the loyalty of 40 to 60 fighters, while 100 remained with Bungos, though statistics on the strength of armed groups in the Philippines are notoriously unreliable.⁷³ A military spokesman suggested that the split might push Karialan to return to the MILF, but as of early October 2016, there was no move in that direction.

Instead, the media reported that five clerics had left BIFF to join the Maute group and Isnilon Hapilon. This may be an example of confused reporting, since Bungos and the Mautes are already reported to be collaborating or it may be that they had been working with the Karialan faction and decided to leave.⁷⁴ One of the five was Salahudin Hassan, usually identified with the al-Khobar Group. In February 2016, he was reported to have run a 45-day training course in bomb-making for BIFF fighters, together with a Singaporean named Muhammad Ali bin Abd al Rahman, better known as Muawiyah, in the Liguasan Marsh area of Central Mindanao.⁷⁵ Other sources reported separately that Muawiyah had been seen in mid-2016 in Bgy Damablak, Talayan, Maguindanao, a BIFF area.

The fracturing suggests that BIFF as an organisation may not survive too long without Kato, but it remains the important lesson of what happens in the MILF if the peace process breaks down.

VI. THE PEACE PROCESS

This brings us to state of that process under President Duterte. Many of those interviewed in October 2016 in Zamboanga, Cotabato and Davao were optimistic that the new "revolutionary" president would find a workable solution for peace in Mindanao. The optimism was particularly bewildering when so many of the aspirations expressed seemed to be mutually exclusive and

71 IPAC interview, government official, Cotabato, 11 October 2016

72 "Clerics assume command of BIFF," www.philstar.com, 22 July 2016.

73 "Military bares leadership split in BIFF," www.gmanetwork.com, 25 July 2016.

74 "Islamic Preachers leave BIFF, Form Breakaway Group," philstar.com, 2 October 2016. The five were Salahudin Hassan, Abdulmakil Esmal, Bashir Ungab, Nasser Adil and Ansari Yunus.

75 "New terror wave feared amid reports 100 BIFF men train in bomb making," *InterAksyon*, 18 February 2016. Muawiyah, also known as Muwawiyah Anjala, was a Singaporean soldier of Indian descent who had come to the Philippines in the 1990s as part of the non-violent missionary group, Jemaah Tabligh. He was moved by the MILF struggle and decided to stay. Because he joined forces with Umar Patek, Philippine officials and media routinely referred to him as a member of JI but he never joined the organization. See IPAC, "Killing Marwan in Mindanao," op.cit., p.5.

when even the most committed Duterte fans acknowledge that nothing involving new legislation, let alone constitutional change, will happen quickly.

Developments in the extremist world are proceeding along a radically different timeline. ISIS is rapidly losing territory in Syria and Iraq, and Southeast Asian fighters, like those from many other countries, are dying in combat or airstrikes. For those committed to the caliphate, the pressure to undertake attacks at home could increase in the short term, regardless of what transpires in Manila, both as a response to ISIS enemies and as a way of showing that ISIS's reach is still global. Some Southeast Asian foreign fighters could also look to Mindanao to provide temporary refuge as they work their way home from the Middle East.

In addition, the massive military operations underway in the Philippines against the ASG and the Mautes may instill a sense of nothing to lose: better to try for a major attack than to get captured or killed before even making the effort. Therefore, whether or not Duterte can deliver on peace, the short-term risk of more violence in the region remains high.

Longer term, failure to deliver on a Bangsamoro polity, after so much effort, could well lead to greater militancy within the MILF, at a time when the current leadership is not about to go back to fighting. Indeed, the level of MILF-military cooperation since the Mamasapano incident has been striking. Some in the rank-and-file think the leadership may have gone too far.⁷⁶ One MILF supporter in Cotabato, looking at joint military operations with the MILF's Task Force Against Shabu in fighting drugs, said in some disgust, "They've domesticated us."⁷⁷

Under the circumstances, the aging MILF command needs the impossible: someone like Omar Maute -- religiously trained, personally likeable, and proven in combat -- who also has the political skills to build a consensus across ethnic and regional lines. All the signs, however, point instead to more fracturing.

The Aquino government before Mamasapano had a package on the table. Together with the MILF, it had signed a Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) on 15 October 2012 and a Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) on 27 March 2014. The agreements needed to be enshrined in a law passed by the Philippines Congress, and a draft Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) that both parties had accepted was being deliberated in Congress in early 2015 with approval likely.

Mamasapano, as noted, abruptly stopped the process and President Aquino left office without seeing his major "legacy project" through to conclusion. When Duterte came in, he assured the MILF that he would continue to promote the BBL, minus the provisions that some legislators had come to see as unconstitutional.⁷⁸

Then he threw two wild cards on the table. One was a proposal for a referendum on federalism within two years, and he would create a commission to collect proposals on how to bring it about. The second was his decision to reach out to Nur Misuari of the Moro National Liberation Front, whose own 1996 peace agreement with the government was largely superseded by negotiations with the MILF.

On 20 July, Duterte approved a roadmap for peace that basically promised all things to all

76 Two incidents are particularly noteworthy. One was the death of top bomb-maker Basit Usman, a close colleague of Marwan's, at MILF hands on 3 May 2015 in Bgy Muti, Guindulungan, Maguindanao. (See "It's official: MILF killed Basit Usman – AFP", *inquirer.net*, 6 May 2015.) The second was the communication between Wahid Tundok of the 105th BC and the military on 28 July 2016. The military was pursuing Karalian of BIFF and accidentally strayed into MILF territory, where Tundok's men shot and killed three soldiers. But before it could turn into another Mamasapano, Tundok called the MILF's head of military affairs who in turn called contacts in the military and it was resolved without further bloodshed.

77 IPAC interview, NGO leader Cotabato, 11 October 2016. For one article on the cooperation, see "PNP-Army-MILF in joint anti-drug operation," *Mindanao Cross*, 8 October 2016.

78 "Duterte ready to give BBL to MILF," *www.inquirer.net*, 23 July 2016.

people, including the MILF, MNLF, Communist Party of the Philippines, Cordillera People's Liberation Army and others. Under the roadmap, the Bangsamoro Transition Commission which had drafted the original BBL, would be tasked to produce a new draft. In August, BTC membership was expanded from 15 to 21, in the hopes that Misuari's people would be represented, but in late October, the executive order that would make the expanded BTC operational lay on the president's desk unsigned.

Also as of October, no decision had been made about how proposals for a new federal state would be reviewed. One option was to have Congress itself act as a constituent assembly to draft the required constitutional changes; a second was to have a general election to choose members for a separate constitutional convention.⁷⁹

The sequencing also remained unclear. The MILF initially had proceeded on the assumption that a new BBL would be drafted and pushed through and federalism, a much more complicated process, would come later. Different signals are coming from different agencies, however – an official of the Presidential Legislative Liaison Office told a gathering in October that federalism would come first.

Then there is the Supreme Court case. June 2015, the Philippine Constitutional Association, a long-established organisation, had submitted a petition to the Supreme Court, asking it to declare the Framework and Comprehensive Agreements on the Bangsamoro unconstitutional. It is not clear when the court ruling will be handed down. Some in the MILF have taken the position that it is better to wait to see which provisions the court accepts or rejects before proceeding with drafting a new law, because if the law is built around only the provisions the court has accepted, there will be no justification for anyone in Congress to reject it.

Apart from what mechanism would be adopted to change the constitution, there were also questions about what options for a possible federal state would emerge. Would it be three large states of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao (unacceptable to the MILF); four states, including the above three plus some version of the Bangsamoro; or eleven separate states reflective of the country's regional governments?

Complicating the matter still further are the improvements that have taken place in governance of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) under Gov. Mujiv Hataman. In some ways, it was the failure of ARMM under Nur Misuari and subsequent leaders that made an MILF-led Bangsamoro thinkable. But if the original ARMM becomes a better managed government, it may undermine support for an alternative.

As of October, therefore, everything remained in flux, yet almost everyone interviewed seemed convinced that Duterte would find a satisfactory way forward.

All this is to say that no one concerned about terrorism should defer serious attention to the problem until the contours of a peace in Mindanao become clear. While the question of what happens to the next generation of MILF fighters is a critical one, it is also important to recognise that the young sophisticates that the Mautes represent already appear to be poaching from the MILF.

VII. SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE STORY OF KAREN AISHA

Social media has assumed a new importance in cross-regional communications, including in the Philippines as the story of Karen Aisha illustrates. She may or may not have tried to infiltrate Southeast Asian and international jihadi groups; she may or may not be married to the AKP's Tokboy. IPAC has no way of assessing the validity of her claims or those of her detractors, but

⁷⁹ "Cha-cha for federalism rolls in House", 12 October 2016.

the storm she created shows the power of a single individual using social media to wreak havoc within a radical movement by sowing doubts and suspicions. Karen's involvement is also another example of the attraction of social media for women who want to participate in the global jihad.

Karen Aisha Hamidon aka Karen Aisha Al-Muslimah aka Umm Khattab Al-Filibiny is a Filipina Muslim convert who became a tireless commentator on jihadi social media, only to be dismissed by many as a spy. It is unclear when Karen converted or when she first began reaching out to jihadists online. She started appearing on Indonesian Telegram groups in August 2015 and aggressively advertised her various accounts on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to ISIS sympathisers around the world.

One of the Telegram groups she took part in was BUG or Baqiyah United Group, created by an Indonesian woman, Aisyah Lina, whose husband was later arrested for terrorism.⁸⁰ Lina then added Karen and Sirajuddin, an Indian who was himself later arrested.⁸¹

Around October 2015, rumours started to circulate in BUG and the Indonesian groups that Karen was a spy. On 11 October 2015, Sirajuddin posted the following message on BUG [spellings as in original]:

Advisory notice for all those who are into Karen Aisha Hamidon's whatsapp group. Her groups have been successfully penetrated by Indian police. She along with other radical members of the group are into look out. Kindly disassociated yourselves from all her whatsapp Dawlah groups quite for sometime till things get settle down. Beauty of e-jihad is to stay safe and wreck havoc into kuffar lives.⁸²

On 15 November 2015, a message appeared in Indonesian posted from the Philippines:

Important!

Information from IS Mujahidin in the Philippines region (Abu Sayyaf):

Assalamualaykum to you all. There is a friend named Karen aisha hamidon who is smart intelligence [sic]. You must be careful. Many mujahidin in the Philippines have been arrested. It was the amir in Basilan who told me and a woman who is also from abroad that we can be traced and our accounts hacked, my messages and those of other ikhwan have been exposed.⁸³

Karen was also accused of having taken over several Telegram channels by appointing herself as administrator and getting the existing one removed. She caused particular anger by disparaging foreign jihadis operating in the Philippines. She called Abu Anas, the Malaysian fighting on Basilan, "a fake leader of ASG". She accused Musa Cerantonio, a jihadist preacher from Melbourne arrested in the Philippines in July 2014, of committing adultery and having no formal Islamic education – "he was only a History Major".⁸⁴

80 Arif Hidayatulloh was arrested outside Jakarta in December 2015 for plotting bomb attacks at the urging of Bahrin Naim in Syria.

81 For the full story of the interaction between Karen and Sirajuddin, see "Islamic State recruits, a Whatsapp group, and two women from the Philippines, Kenya," *India Today*, 1 June 2016

82 BUG (Telegram post), 11 October 2015.

83 Divisi Jihad Media (Telegram post), 11 November 2015.

84 Robert Musa Cerantonio, a Muslim convert, was arrested on 11 July 2014 in Cebu. The Australian government had cancelled his passport after he was discovered to be preaching support for ISIS, enabling Philippine police to arrest and deport him as an undocumented foreigner. He was later arrested in northern Queensland in May 2016 in connection with a plan to sail to Indonesia and try to join ISIS from there. See "Islamic preacher Musa Cerantonio among five arrested over alleged plan to join Islamic State," www.abc.net.au, 11 May 2016.

In December 2015, Lina tried to clarify the rumours with Filipino Facebook friend called Tuwan Pungutan. Tuwan sent her a photo of Karen's passport ID, and said that he got the photo and other evidence of Karen's being a spy from two friends: an Indonesian who had received money from her and one "Moroccan muhajir" – a possible reference to the Moroccan killed in Basilan in April 2016.⁸⁵

On 5 December 2015, a Telegram group linked to Musa Cerantonio released an "Investigative Report" on Karen.⁸⁶ It said that she used social media to:

1. Defame and publicly humiliate her identified targets
2. Physiological harassments by deploying her thugs against them [sic]
3. Publicly expose their private phone numbers/emails
4. Hacking their phones for sensitive information
5. Open threats to thwart their sensitive plans (includes Hjarah Journey)
6. Extortion and ransom
7. Leaking information to intelligence dept. enabling their arrests.⁸⁷

In response, Karen claimed that she tried to clear up her name by "trying to contact them one by one 4 Jama'ah of Bangsamoro Mujahideen here in Mindanao." In January, she wrote that her three Twitter and 50 Facebook accounts had been suspended. She then disappeared from view.

On 21 March 2016, there was news that Karen was captured:

Breaking News! Urgent! Please share on Facebook, Twitter and make it Viral. A suspected spy was captured by the Mujahideen in the Philippines. shes a woman by the name of Karen Aisha Al Muslima. We now need complainants with their proof of screen shots and other evidences of her wrong doings to find her guilty and execute her. please send your evidences to [@Ghareeb7241992](#).⁸⁸

Some of Karen's followers on Telegram became alarmed when she did not respond, but eventually a post appeared urging patience and saying there was no need to try and contact her. If there was "no strong evidence against her", she would be back soon, the writer said, suggesting that she was undergoing some kind of trial.⁸⁹

On 6 June, an Indonesian posted that she had found Karen's new Facebook account and that Karen was now married to an "ameer" – and in September 2016, Karen herself claimed she had married Kumander Tokboy.⁹⁰

One interesting aspect of the diatribes about Karen is that several were in Indonesian/Malay – but apparently posted by Filipinos. It is just worth noting that language is important, and the more capacity Philippine extremists develop in Malay, the greater the potential for cooperation.

85 The posting, undated but forwarded by Lina on 7 December 2015, read in Malay, "ine gambar di kirim sini sama aku yang satu kawan aq dari indon tapi yang kawan aq di kirim juga duit sama Karen terbaik b yang strategy parampuan itu, yang satu kawan aq dari morocan muhajir juga adapun dia itu bukti yang perempuan c karenaisha spy!!"

86 Memoirs of A Mujahid (Telegram post), 6 December 2015.

87 Ibid.

88 The message was shared by a Telegram user, "My Chinese Grandpa", with various Telegram groups, 21 March 2016.

89 Telegram post, 23 March 2016.

90 Telegram post, 29 September 2016.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

This report makes clear how much ISIS has helped expand regional linkages. In the early 2000s, the concern was mostly focused on the foreigners from JI and a few other organisations in the region that came to the Philippines for training or refuge.

Social media was not an issue – few of the militants even had email addresses in 2002-3. Now the Mautes or others can easily reach across national boundaries, seeking inspiration, instruction or funding. Ethnic and clan ties remain strong, but it is probably a mistake to underestimate the power of ideology in the age of ISIS – or at least the appeal of the ISIS brand and the trappings that go with it – especially among younger militants.

ISIS has brought an ideological justification for unity that has turned into operational collaboration: the 2 September Davao bombing is evidence. Basilan has provided the example of the transformation of the UTG into a pro-ISIS group being trained by a Moroccan, assisted by Malaysians and almost certainly funded from outside. The AKP shows us the importance of prison bonds forged in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines and how easily those bonds extend into Syria. Omar Maute's own family ties to Bekasi, fluency in Indonesian and knowledge of social media may have given him a wider international network than the Philippines government has even begun to suspect.

Even as ISIS declines in strength, it is more important than ever to understand the followers it has spawned in Southeast Asia and how they are interacting with each other. Cross-border violence is not just theoretically possible; the links described in this paper make it likely.

APPENDIX I:

CRIMES INVOLVING THE BASILAN ABU SAYYAF GROUP, 2007-2012

Some of the incidents involving the Basilan ASG from 2007 to 2012 include the following:

- 7 July 2007, kidnapping of Preciosa Feliciano, a nurse, in Zamboanga City. She was released near Tipo-Tipo, Basilan on 7 November after her family paid a ransom of P1.8 million [\$37,000]. More than a dozen people were kidnapped around the same time in Zamboanga and Basilan by an ASG group reportedly headed by Furuji Indama and Nur Hassan Jamiri.⁹¹
- 10 June 2007 kidnapping of Italian priest Giancarlo Bossi in Bulawan, Zamboanga. He was freed on 19 July.
- 10 July 2007, clash between the military and combined force of local MILF and ASG in Bgy Guinata, Tipo-Tipo, Basilan in a botched rescue effort of Father Bossi, whom it later transpired was not even being held on the island. Fourteen marines were killed, with ten of them later beheaded; they also lost seventeen firearms. The MILF forces were led by Musao Abubakar and Amir Minkong of the 114th BC, while Isnilon Hapilon led the ASG contingent.
- 25 June 2008, kidnapping of members of Basilan Electric Cooperative's engineering department in Tuburan, Basilan by ASG group led by Nur Hassan Jamiri.⁹²
- April 2009, kidnapping of Cosme Aballes and six others on Basilan. Aballes, a Filipino, was executed on 13 April in Lamitan, Basilan as government troops moved in.
- 12 August 2009, ASG ambush of soldiers in Ungkaya Pukan, Basilan; 23 soldiers killed.
- November 2009, abduction of plywood workers Michael Tan, Oscar Lu and Marquez Singson in Maluso Basilan; Singson beheaded one month later.
- 11 July 2011, kidnapping of Gerfa Lunsman, son Kevin and nephew Romnick Jackaria. Gerfa released in October, Kevin escaped December; family paid more than \$20,000 in ransom.
- 9 October 2011, bombing of cockfighting center in San Roque, Zamboanga, three wounded.⁹³
- 18 October 2011, major clash between MILF and government troops in al-Barka, Basilan that killed nineteen soldiers and resulted from a failure to use mechanisms under the peace process. The operation had targeted an MILF leader involved in the 2007 clash who had been arrested but escaped in December 2009.
- 27 November 2011, explosion at Atilano Pension House, Zamboanga City, three killed, 27 wounded.
- 5 December 2011, kidnapping of Australian Warren Rodwell; he was only freed in March 2013 after family raised ransom payment of \$94,600.
- 4 July 2012, kidnapping of two Chinese nationals in the mining business, Luo Jian and Lin Yuan-kai, in Kabasalan, Zamboanga. The first was released in late August 2012, while Lin Yuan-kai escaped when police Special Action Force raided an ASG camp in Sitio Porlos, Bgy. Calabasa on 20 September 2012, killing five. More than ten workers of Tumahubong Agrarian Reform Cooperative (Tarbidci) in Sumisip killed in six separate ASG raids in 2012.

91 "P1.8M paid for kidnapped nurse's freedom in Basilan, www.gma.network.com, 8 November 2008. Other kidnap victims included nursing student Joed Anthony Pilangga, kidnapped from Zamboanga City on 17 October 2008; Esperancita Hupida and Millet Mendoza, two Spanish NGO workers, kidnapped 15 September 2008; Hupida was released 30 October and Mendoza 14 November 2008 after ransom payments.

92 "One of five abduction victims in Basilan released – Army", ABS-CBN News, 26 June 2008.

93 People's Daily Online, "Philippines nabs deadly hotel bombing planner," 30 November 2011.

INSTITUTE FOR POLICY ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT (IPAC)

The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) was founded in 2013 on the principle that accurate analysis is a critical first step toward preventing violent conflict. Our mission is to explain the dynamics of conflict—why it started, how it changed, what drives it, who benefits—and get that information quickly to people who can use it to bring about positive change.

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